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Truth Claims in Fiction Film: Introduction

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The historical basis of works in the Western literary canon has been a focus of enquiry for centuries. From Homer's *Iliad* composed in antiquity, to the phenomenon of documentary drama from the 1960s on, the extent of fact in literary fiction has repeatedly been measured and assessed. The question of whether and to what extent legends are fiction or history reflected the rise of a hierarchy of truth value with fact at the top. Truth value defined genre in the modern era and continues to do so ordinarily today, but it was not always thus. An ancient or medieval text could pass through historicity to fictionality and back. Fiction is made up in the imagination and contains events which did not happen, perhaps alongside those which did—this is what its audience is given to understand. Truth, within or outside fiction, is often taken to mean conformity to fact or actuality; it involves reliable narration. Teasing apart truth and fiction in film has been considered an obviously worthwhile task. Philip Rosen's study *Change Mummified* went further and argued for the centrality of historicity to film. It asked what we make of the concern for recovering the past in many modes of cinema, from Hollywood to documentary to postcolonial film. As we are now long familiar with the constructed nature of all narrative, how does connecting film and historicity affect the theorisation of fiction film?

Cultural production has always been in pursuit of the real, but its makers have not always marked it or surrounded it with claims to truth. What this journal issue is concerned with is protestations of veracity amid free invention. Some occur in the framing of a film, at its opening or closing, others are embedded in the film, whilst others occur in the sphere of fiction film but outside the recording itself. Truth claims in fiction film often arise in gesturing towards sources, replacing entertainment with "histotainment", and pursuing history alongside emotional impact and popular appeal.

What are the implications of cinematic truth claims? Are they a sign of defensiveness, of straining the bounds of credibility, or of directorial self consciousness? Do they reflect a desire to have an impact on public memory? Do they indicate propaganda? Are they even to be taken seriously or are they a parody? Mock truth claims abound in literature; one need only recall the fictitious editor in *Gulliver's Travels* who makes claims to truth. As Natalie Zemon Davis has highlighted, "there are more ways in which film can establish authenticity than is usually thought—

some tried and unrecognised, some yet to be discovered” (Zemon Davis 464). This issue of *New Readings* analyses unrecognised ways of establishing authenticity and provides new readings of recognised ones. The varied approaches to the materials studied reflect one of the key challenges any such discussion has to confront, i.e. the lack of a tight notion of the very concepts of *fiction*, *truth* and *authenticity*. Many of the films discussed in this issue we might want to term “factual fictions”, to borrow the title of Lennard J. Davis’s book on truth claims and mock truth claims in the early modern English novel.

The issue opens with Marco Grosoli’s article on a 1947 essay by the film theorist André Bazin who claims the truth of all film lies in it as a form offering both hypnotising illusion and realism at the same time. Grosoli proposes a re-evaluation of Bazin’s theoretical position by prioritising the idea of film as social documentary. He draws on little known articles from Bazin’s theoretical oeuvre to argue that the French critic claims that cinema is a social documentary inasmuch as it is inevitably a reflection of the collective unconscious at a certain place and time. The article finds that Bazin believes cinema to be fundamentally about the reality of appearance and not any kind of scaled copy of reality. He claims that truth can be equally before or behind the camera, on screen or in the head as a psychological reality. And that both cinema and criticism of it should be helping the audience see something more true than reality itself. The ideas of claiming film as social documentary and as more true than reality have resonance across the journal issue, which offers case studies of truth claims concerning individual fiction films made in a variety of European languages and cultures.

In his article, Dom Holdaway interrogates the engagement with historical referents in four contemporary Italian mafia films. He conceives of two of these crime films as self-consciously “performing” historical accuracy and two as being historiographic metafiction. The truth claim in the film *Gomorra*, he argues, is made through the use of intertextual citation of other films, through the press pack accompanying the film’s release, which declares that “[t]he stories you are about to see were taken from real life”, and through the director’s statements concerning the importance of verisimilitude. It is also made through filming on location in a notoriously crime-ridden area and using local inhabitants as support actors. Furthermore, Holdaway examines the use of epitaphic notes at the end of the film and the incorporation of news footage in *The One Hundred Steps* to make a serious truth claim that denies the audience the option of reading the film’s reality as simply fictional.

Carola Daffner’s article examines sinister truth claims made by means of visual geographies in three Nazi-era German films. Her analysis suggests how they are truth claims for a particular imagined community, as perhaps all truth claims are. She shows that the manipulation of space and iconography in cinema can make a claim for authenticity by being emotionally compelling. In *Triumph of the Will*, she argues, Nuremberg becomes a Nazi fantasy of the “true” Germany. In *Jew Süss*, it is Württemberg, another place that exists, which functions in this way and as a space is contrasted with the Jewish ghetto, which the filming consigns to being

that which is not and should not be. Daffner's article designates *Triumph of the Will* a fiction film disguised as documentary and *Jew Süß* a fiction film claiming to show historical truth. Made in a time of total war, two years before the end of Nazism, the fantasy film *Münchhausen*, by contrast, exposes Nazi landscapes to be unbelievable and their truth claims to be false. Its spatial caricature, as interpreted by Daffner, shows up the mechanisms behind geographical truth claims.

Andrew Wormald examines four so-called "event movies", which have historical subjects and were broadcast to a mass audience on German television between 2004 and 2007. The production company for the melodramatic films has made substantial truth claims for them through interviews and promotional documents. The article highlights how the broadcast of documentaries on relevant history immediately after the fiction films, the distribution of the films with educational packs to schools, and the provision of educational resources online make truth claims. It quotes the filmmaker Nico Hofmann as declaring publicly that he is presenting German history authentically for the purpose of national psychoanalysis. Wormald's article interrogates what the publicised use of research and historical advisers means for this inflated claim, as well as the involvement of eye-witnesses, returning to original locations, and the imitation of historical photographs in film.

Karina von Lindeiner-Stráský's article looks at four contemporary German fiction films which make truth claims concerning events in the era of Nazism. It is concerned with the incorporation of factual material from documents such as historical film clips, memoirs and flyers, as well as with what role the audience's expectations play in the function of truth claims. The titles of the films, the use of intertitles giving places, dates and times, and the use of music are further examined here as devices making truth claims. The biopic *Sophie Scholl* mounts the following text as an explicit truth claim: "Dieser Film beruht auf historischen Fakten, bisher unveröffentlichten Verhörprotokollen und neuen Interviews mit Zeitzeugen." [This film is based on historical facts, previously unpublished interrogation reports and new interviews with eye-witnesses.] Lindeiner-Stráský's article further suggests that fiction films can make implicit truth claims through utilising a documentary aesthetic, including a reliable voice in voice-over or the actual person, otherwise played by an actor, being interviewed in the framing of the film. The article closes by considering that the effect of mounting a fact in a fiction film can be to alter the original fact.

Maryse Bray and Agnès Calatayud analyse Iranian director Abbas Kiarostami's film *Certified Copy*, which has its main characters directly articulate concerns about truth, authenticity, reproductions, fakes and forgeries. In this respect it demonstrates a quite different approach to truth claims in fiction film, taking truth claims as a theme discussed within a film. By juxtaposing the director's recorded view that in film "ce qu'on finit par voir est encore plus vrai que la réalité" [what you end up seeing is truer than real life] with statements made within his film about artworks, originals and copies, the article argues that the film's construction claims that it is true because it adds a reality to reality and not because it is a copy of reality.

Anneli Lehtisalo's article focuses on a 1940 Finnish biopic in order to reflect on the wider issues of truth claims made in the reception of biographical fiction films. She points out that the immediate newspaper and online reaction to a biopic makes claims about the authenticity with which a known figure has been portrayed. She links these truth claims—proclaiming the recognisability of a person and a life, in this case of a national poet—to the pleasure of watching film. At the same time, the article traces the truth claims in promotional materials, which involved declaring how much historical research had been done and which in turn shaped the reception of the film. Links are made to identifying and making intimate the cultural history of a community.

Nadine Nowroth concludes this journal issue by analysing a German biopic from 2004, which is based on the published diaries of a novelist in the German Democratic Republic. At the premiere of the film, the subject's brother publicly attested that he found "über die Hälfte unglaublich authentisch, und dass er das Gefühl habe, das sei Brigitte Reimann, die er sieht" [more than half unbelievably authentic and that he felt it was [his sister] Brigitte Reimann that he was seeing before him]. Nowroth's article places this truth claim at the heart of the film's reception and works with a concept of adaptation that includes a shift in ontology from the real to the fictional via the edited diaries. Truth claims within the film are made by diary extracts read in voice-over and by the text inserted at the end referring the audience to her unfinished novel and to her death in 1973. Outside the film, the competing truth claims of the Stasi files raise wider questions about the imagined community for whom the truth claims around this film were made.

Together the articles assembled in this journal issue suggest that truth claims are always made for a specific imagined community and are part of building that community's identity. In film, truth claims are a serious business. Promotion and reception of a film, the embedding of a film in public debate, tends to indicate an impact on the original facts utilised in the fiction, or at least the aim to change those facts. The truth claims analysed in this journal issue point to the centrality of fiction film in the dissemination of living history to the public of a specific culture and time.

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